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Understanding the Stereotypes Against Gifted Students: A look at the social and emotional struggles of stereotyped students

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Background Information

Approximately 6% of students enrolled in schools in the United States, grades K-12, are classified as 'gifted' (NAGC, 2010). This estimates to roughly 3 million children who are of higher academic achievability than average students. Among these gifted students, some struggle with behavioral, emotional, and social development concerns. Their cognitive abilities set them apart from their peers. Their exceptional abilities can cause anxiety, underachievement, and feelings of isolation from the majority of other students. However, for many of these students, it is the stereotypes regarding intelligence that has brought about their struggles, or perpetuated them. This paper will aim to describe giftedness as it is recognized in today's culture. It will explore the importance of understanding the perspective of gifted children, and how this knowledge should be applied in the classroom for educators. It will examine the stereotypes against gifted children, and the social and emotional struggles which develop as a result of those notions. Finally, it will discuss the projected future studies of development among the gifted.

Gifted children are recognized most commonly by the definition provided by the former U.S. Commissioner of Education Sidney P. Marland, Jr. The August 1971 report to Congress states that, "Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society" (Marland, 1972, p2). This means that gifted children are placed in a different category than average children. They are capable of more challenging subject material and succeed at difficult tasks. There are several different types of intelligence studied. Some of these are intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, and psychomotor ability (Marland, 1972). These strengths further translate into verbal intelligence, musical intelligence, logical intelligence, spatial intelligence, or artistic intelligence (to name a few).

Once a child is identified as gifted there are several different models, standardized, nonverbal and verbal tests used to further gauge and quantify strengthened areas of intelligence. Starting in 1912, the IQ (intelligence quotient) test was the most common tool used to denote intelligence in general. A typical high score is considered over 130 or 140 IQ. These tests have allowed for an examination of mathematical and scientific propensities (O'Boyle, 2008). Because these tests were used to only recognize math and science skills as a clear sign of intelligence, history created a single identification for gifted students. Americans have viewed gifted students as a single collective, almost elitist, group (Berlin, 2009). This viewpoint has slowly shifted, but the idea remains in stereotypes present in today's culture.

Straying from this historical trend, a difference is now recognized between academic intelligence, which is measured more traditionally by knowledge and comprehension math, science, and more

quantitative studies, and emotional intelligence, which is knowledge of social skills, social maturity, participation in extracurricular activities, leadership activities, and peer interactions (Rogers, 2002). Both academically intelligent and emotionally intelligent children develop their social and emotional skills differently.

The concept of emotional intelligence, first called 'social intelligence' was first uncovered in the 1920s by E.L. Thorndike. To best describe emotional intelligence, Mayer and Salovey (2004) once wrote, "They [gifted children] recognized an individual's ability to monitor their own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among emotions, and to use this information to guide thinking and action" (p.37). This means that children with strength for perceiving, expressing, and regulating both their own emotions and the emotions of others, have emotional intelligence. A child that, perhaps seems intuitive or sensitive to the feelings of others, might remember to save extra cookies for a friend before mom has taught the importance of sharing. Later in life, this emotional intelligence seems to translate into an adaptive, flexible, people-person nature. While today's scholars and scientists might be academically gifted, usually strong leaders, and role models are seen as more emotionally gifted (Chan, 2000).

In American culture, the term intelligence has sprouted connotations and perceptions by teachers, parents, siblings, and peers. In exploring the social and emotional developmental trends of gifted children, it is especially critical to examine the prominent stereotypes. American culture places a negative image on intellectual ability, and a more positive image on athleticism, sociability, and leadership (Berlin, 2009). Gifted children have the ability to develop a normal, healthy, well-adjusted self concept, however, skewed peer and educator perspectives of the gifted student can lead the gifted student to react with destructive behaviors and coping mechanisms (Cross, 2005).

Importance for Educators

Nearly 40% of a child's waking hours are spent with his teachers, if not more. Due to this constant engagement, teachers are likely to notice a student's natural proclivity within a subject area (Siegle, 2001). Teachers identify gifted students and make recommendations for gifted programs or advanced classes (honors level, college level, science league, "mathletes," etc). Their interaction, encouragement, and understanding of gifted children will strongly affect the success level of the student. Many of the challenges and stressors felt by a gifted child are derived from his academic success. If a teacher is able to produce a place of comfort, harmony, and welcoming, a student is more likely to fit in and take pride in his work.

Teachers are liaisons between students, parents, and administrators. As a focal point in the lives of their students, teachers set the tone for their classrooms. Their stronghold in the classroom can help to shift student perspectives by promoting open-mindedness. This is to say that negative stereotypes in a given classroom can be deflated. For this reason, it is critical for teachers to understand and acknowledge the stereotypes that exist regarding gifted children. If educators can recognize negative perceptions and alter them, they may promote positive social and emotional development in intellectually gifted students.

To reverse this concept, if a teacher views gifted students in a negative light, his disapproving perception can set a different tone for the other students in the classroom. It has been noted that a teacher who lacks training or understanding of gifted children may help to perpetuate negative stereotypes by his attitude, body language and gestures toward gifted students. "Teachers perceptions

are colored by their knowledge of gifted programs and their training in the field of gifted children," (Berlin, 2009). Teachers must receive training to better understand the gifted, their needs, and the gifted programs these students may be exposed. They must also learn to reflect and model nonbiased, welcoming attitudes towards gifted students.

Teachers will likely develop positive attitudes towards their gifted students when they know and understand their needs. Furthermore, when a teacher's area of expertise matches the interest of a particular gifted child, that teacher may help to further develop and refine the skill set of that child. This bond or connection produces positive reinforcement for the gifted child (Ketcham & Sawyer, 1955). Furthermore, when classmates view their teacher in a positive light, and the gifted child reflects similar interests, the gifted student feels more at ease. This contributes to a positive self concept which can thwart the effects of negative stereotypes.

Prevalent Stereotypes

(1) All gifted children are the same. They are nerdy, math geeks lacking social skills.

This first stereotype suggests that all intelligent children only show strengths in the subjects of math and science, and they are all the same; they are nerdy. Furthermore, it is often believed that the children with math and science aptitudes have a tendency towards socially awkward behavior (lacking in social/emotional aptitudes), physical weakness, and an obsession with the pursuit of academic endeavors (Cross, 2005). This misconception of gifted students has propelled the image of the 'geek,' which has made academic competence undesirable. Gifted children do not want to be recognized by one label that identifies them in a negative context. Labeling casts a student into a single identity, which can thwart hopes for a healthy self concept because role confusion may develop (Cross, 2005). Their role becomes that of the 'smart kid.' When a child is first identified as gifted, nerdy, or exceptional, he begins to develop and identity that includes this giftedness. In most cases, gifted children do not want to be the nerd, so they develop coping mechanisms. A false identity is purposefully assumed that does not match their own true identity. This may include (1) a totally visible identity (a child that touts his intelligence, but isolates himself from school cliques), (2) a blending-in identity (a child who avoids direct attention to himself by blending in with others) or (3) a misidentifying identity (a child who connects with a group of friends that are the opposite of the expectation for a gifted child) (Cross, 2005).

In the first case, a gifted student embraces his intelligence, but may define himself entirely by his academic successes with no room for meaningful age appropriate socialization (Clayton & Carter, 1992). This can lead to excessive pressure to achieve with little room for failure. In the second case, a child purposefully fails to achieve, denies his intelligence, in an attempt to fit in with the mediocre. Finally, the third case represents a child who intentionally acts out with misbehaved peers to draw attention away from his intelligence. Deviant behaviors may include drug use, committing minor crimes, and early sexual activity. The harmful effect of developing coping mechanisms is that children lack a connection between their supposed identity and their true identity. The repercussions to follow vary.

(2) All gifted students develop cognitive and emotional skills at the same rate.

Another stereotype suggests that gifted students develop cognitively and socially at the same rate. Parents and teachers have assumed that if a child shows competency in one area of life, that child

should be competent in other areas as well. The signs of advanced cognitive ability may allow a child to develop one skill set, however, is not directly correlated to emotional development. In other words, a 10 year old mathematically gifted child who shows advanced development in the right prefrontal cortex may intellectually express the abilities of an 18 year old math student. However, this does not mean that the child can exhibit the self regulation, inhibited impulses, or maturity of an 18 year old (Clayton & Carter, 1992). “Adults should realize that some gifted children have an intellectual ability to understand the world years ahead of their chronological age, but have the emotional development of same-aged peers” (Cross, 2005). If a gifted child can be challenged academically, it is untrue that all gifted children will therefore understand their own emotions at an advanced rate. Metacognition, or recognition of the self, may occur later in life. If this is not understood within the growing student’s environment, forced maturation may be resented later in life. Forced emotional expectations can lead to discomfort, confusion, and anxiety. In the extreme situation, this can lead to depression.

(3) The best way to keep gifted children engaged is to inflate their amount of schoolwork.

Since boredom has been seen in some gifted students, is has been assumed that all gifted children require constant stimulation. In an attempt to help their gifted students avoid feelings of boredom and disengagement, adults aim to challenge and test their gifted children with large amounts of course work, rigorous writing assignments, and independent projects (Hargrove, 2005). However, it is not the amount of work that challenges a student, but the subject content. The regurgitation of facts, formulas, or texts fail to challenge students. The idea that more is better is a commonly stereotyped misconception. Students actually become bored if the coursework is unappealing to them (Clayton & Carter, 1992). Furthermore, an exorbitant course load can actually lead to several developmental issues. Some students feel over stimulated and overworked because their alpha personalities strive for perfection at every task. Because there is not enough time in the day to accomplish some given tasks, students feel that they are unable to perform to their own standard. Gifted students may feel pressure due to their need for constant success (Cross, 2005). These pressures can accumulate and cause gifted students sleeping troubles, anxiety, negative eating habits, feelings of failure, and depression.

(4) Gifted children cannot fit in because they are ‘too smart.’

Another prevalent stereotype is that some intelligent students are ‘too smart for their own good’ (Putterbaugh, 2009). Being ‘too smart,’ in part, means that gifted children cannot relate to their peers because gifted students come across as confusing or not socially age appropriate. When they try to explain topics of interest to their peers, they use terms, vocabulary, or concepts that are too advanced. It is believed that gifted children think too often, and cannot relax or have fun with their peers. This viewpoint in exacerbated by American culture. “There is in America, and apparently always has been, a definite prejudice against intellectuals, against people considered ‘too smart’” (Carter & Clayton, 1992). These students struggle to communicate effectively with age mates. They may also fail to understand that peers do not share their comprehension level.

The stereotyped term, too smart, has been coined distinctly by Americans. In most other countries the intellectual stars are given support, honors, prestige, and opportunity (Carter & Clayton, 1992). Because our country’s children are not taught to value and honor intelligence American gifted students can feel outcast because they are so often put down by others. A term such as ‘too smart’ develops a false notion of gifted students, which average abilitied students perpetuate in social settings. If average abilitied students cannot understand or socialize with gifted students, gifted children are likely to be

excluded from socialization. Average students make an excuse for their own inability to understand their gifted peers and assume that it is the gifted children who are ‘dumb.’ This can develop into constant teasing, mockery, and put downs against a gifted child, which may lead that gifted child to long for the mediocre (Putterbaugh, 2009; Zeigler & Heller, 2000). The gifted students are seen as too different to have a shot at fitting it. Because gifted children want to be ‘normal’ they sometimes feel that their abilities or gifts are the abnormal factors in their lives. Intelligence becomes ‘a curse.’ Gifted children develop feelings of shame or guilt for their intelligence, which can break down self esteem constructs. These gifted children may not develop a strong sense of self. Operant conditioning by teachers or parents have less of a positive effect when it is inconsistent with the perception of peers towards the gifted child. A child who is smarter than the average student is assumedly too smart to assimilate.

(5) All gifted students are introverted, and this is a bad thing.

Another stereotype assumes that all gifted students display characteristics of introversion (Ensign, 2000; Pautterbaugh, 2009). Introversion is a means by which energy is gained through inward thinking and time spent with the self. For introverts, stress relief and internal calm come from quiet time spent without interaction with others. The tranquility of alone time helps to ‘recharge the batteries.’ Research suggests that introverted brains process information with more frontal lobe activity and lower tolerance for sensory input” (Ensign, 2000). This simply means that while a child may thrive and enjoy the time spent with just one other person, or alone, as soon as more individuals enter the picture, the child becomes increasingly uncomfortable. For the introvert, there is sensitivity for sensory stimulation.

While only one third of average abilitied individuals are introverts, around two thirds of highly intelligent individuals are introverts. Although not all gifted students are introverted, many are, and are often antagonized for being so. Society assumes that an individual with a desire for less social interaction is a loner, or an outsider. It is stereotyped that introversion is a choice more so than a hereditary trait affected by brain development and activity. The stereotype has generated a negative connotation, and a destructive identifying label that gifted children have no control over.

Since this stereotype refers to the issues of labeling, gifted children who feel criticized for their introversion may struggle with developing a strong sense of self. Identity may suffer because although intelligent students seek isolation to concentrate and find peace, society tells them that this is strange or out of place for a developing child. As a result of these negative perceptions, more serious concerns such as depression, isolation, high levels of anxiety, demonstration of low self esteem, apprehension of risk taking, and skewed perception and understanding of the self may become prevalent (Zeigler & Heller, 2000).

Application to the classroom

While stereotypes have contributed to social or emotional difficulties for some gifted students, there are plenty of students who exhibit healthy, stable social and emotional lives in spite of our culture’s perceptions. When challenged, encouraged, and supported, gifted children will respond as any other child; they develop a strong self concept and take pride in their work (Berlin, 2009). As mentioned earlier, teacher interaction and support is essential in promoting positive perceptions. Understanding gifted children can start in the classroom.

The first big hurdle to overcome is to debunk and redefine the image of 'the smart kid.' To ratify the detrimental self concept that can develop among gifted students, teachers need to find a way to disengage from this singularly negative identity and focus attention on the distinctively different characteristics of gifted children. "The patterns of development, the rate of growth, the combination of potential, interest, aptitude—all suggest that gifted students are best identified as individuals" (Passow, 1957). Each student should be looked at and encouraged as unique.

To deter from the negative connotation of 'the nerd' or 'the geek' teachers have started to teach children that intelligence is not a fixed state. When students recognize that 'being a nerd' is something that they have control over, it seems to take on a new meaning (Cross, 2005). For example, a student might say, "I feel like being a nerd today….I am going to finish reading this chapter so I get a good grade." This concept suggests that being a nerd is a chosen action that does not entirely define the individual. This can help a student's self concept because it alters the label of nerd, but does not entirely compromise the child's identity. A gifted child can feel that he is not only defined by intelligence because it is only one part of him (Cross, 2005).

Since gifted children do not develop at the same rates, cognitively and emotionally, teachers should be cognizant and understanding of immature reactions to assignments, group projects, and social interactions. At a younger age, a gifted child may be more concerned with fitting in with his peers than completing a difficult math assignment. He may not articulate his emotions with ease or express hardships as an older child might. Educators must remember that a gifted mathematician may still feel vulnerable, unsure of himself, confused, or stressed. Competitive, assertive learning strategies may be used in the classroom to tackle a problem set. But a gentler, warmer attitude may be needed when aiding a child emotionally. Respect for the growth process will allow teachers to communicate effectively with gifted students.

In an attempt to avoid boredom or disengagement from learning, authors Ketcham & Sawyer (1955) offer several specific solutions for educators working with the gifted. They propose that gifted students explore their learned course material in a new way by teaching it to younger students because, "[gifted students] would learn a great deal both about the material to be presented and about the problems of human relations encountered in a teaching situation" (p.150). Students can see course material through the eyes of different abilitied students and learn to show patience and understanding for the learning process. Teaching can be used as a means to challenge gifted students and develop their maturity. Ketcham & Sawyer go on to explain that, "Another benefit of this activity would be interesting gifted students in teaching as a possible vocation" (p.150). Presenting a potential vocation creates long term goal development with the hope of a rewarding profession. This can drive future learning interests.

Teachers may also elude boredom among the gifted by allowing children to study what interests them, and to continually challenge with an introduction to unexpected topics. Students become fully engaged in topics that pose controversial debate. For example, "…a particularly fruitful study might be that of the relationship between religious beliefs and institutions and the government of society" (p.150). Providing an array of multi-leveled discussion projects which utilize critical thinking skills can challenge a student, and encourage peer and teacher discussion.

To defy the assumption that intelligent children are 'too smart' to fit in with their peers, the facilitation of social interactions will help. As stated earlier, peer tutoring can act as a means to encourage positive interaction between gifted and typical abilitied students. Collaborative projects are another option.

Since teachers may notice social struggles first, they can encourage parents to establish social environments for their gifted children through church activities, after school programs, music groups, and school sports teams, outside of the classroom where children can intermingle with youths their own age. Today in age, teachers can also encourage socialization between students of similar interests through electronic pen pal assignments, and internet exploration (Cross, 2005). Cyber communication in moderation can present several avenues for socialization.

As for the negative perception of introverted individuals, the best thing that teachers can do is provide knowledge to their students. Introversion is not a choice, and quiet alone time is not anti-social. It is a necessity for some individuals. Understanding, tolerance, and respect will help to redefine our past assumptions of gifted students.

Ultimately, in rearing and educating gifted children, each child should be treated differently. Their needs will vary depending upon a multitude of factors. Gifted students are a hugely diverse group because their experiences and character traits can vary by so many variables. They should be treated on a case by case basis.

What the future holds

The past represents strong negative feelings towards intelligent individuals. In an article by Frances Horowitz (1986), it is blatantly inferred that, "…our society has, at best, an ambivalent attitude toward increasing our understanding of gifted and talented individuals and toward serving their needs. This attitude may reflect a general reluctance within a democratic society to foster 'elitism' or the widespread assumption that the intellectually able can fend for themselves" (p.1147). This attitude has shifted with the technological boom of the 1990's.The concept of intelligence as elitist has been replaced by a concept of intelligence as productive. Americans love technology because it simplifies our lives. The hard work of computer-guru Bill Gates is recognized as masterful and prolific. Americans respect him as a celebrity instead of seeing 'the geek from the IT department.' As we continue to reallocate our understanding of gifted students, they can thrive emotionally and socially, while contributing to society at large (Cross, 2005). Teachers can help to develop the gifted child identity as helper, mentor, or contributor in their classrooms, in an effort to reinforce this current trend.

Today in history, most of the individuals who continue to promote negative stereotypes against gifted students are actually not immediate friends or family members. Strangers, outsiders, or class mates who are not close peers choose to tease and mock the gifted students in their class (Cross, 2005). For the most part, gifted students are seeing respect and encouragement from the people who know and love them. This is another step towards breaking down previous negative connotations. If we can convince strangers and onlookers to be kind and accepting, the trend to mock 'the smart kid' will be a notion of the past.

One of the biggest changes that we are seeing in classrooms is the concept that intelligence is not a fixed character trait. While some children are born with a greater proclivity towards certain subjects in school, the fact remains that intellect, like a muscle, can grow over time. Hard work, time, and energy contribute towards a person's achievability. If teachers can edify past practices, and instruct children on how to fail and achieve successfully, we will start to see a concentrated effort towards developing intelligence in all types of students. This merging of ability levels will allow for a positive exchange of ideas, mentorship, and, ultimately, close the social gap between the intelligent and the average

abilitied student. While there will always remain disparities in ability levels, developed respect for one another, and a more helpful interaction between students will at least hinder previous negative labeling patterns that we have seen.

The future will hopefully teach society that the gifted and talented have needs. The false notion that gifted children do not need support and encouragement in order to succeed must be negated. The gifted are just like typically developing children. Nurturing, patience, and understanding are needed to help promote a healthy self concept. The patterned coping mechanisms that gifted children are likely to display should be learned and understood by parents and educators. Anxiety, self concept, forced isolation, and depression can be prevented or at least managed if the cause is easy to see. Shifting stereotypes is no easy task, but the beginning lies in understanding.

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